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UNCLAS ABUJA 001430

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958:

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: MINISTER OF AVIATION REQUESTS U.S.

ASSISTANCE TO INVESTIGATE EAS AIRLINE CRASH

1.(u) Ambassador received an urgent call from the Nigerian Minister of Aviation Kemi Chikwe with an appeal for assistance in investigating the Saturday, May 4 crash of the EAS BAC1-11-500 aircraft in Kano. The EAS aircraft crashed almost immediately after takeoff, killing all 79 passengers and crew on board and approximately 30 people on the ground (SEPTEL).

2. (u) Chikwe requested an aviation expert in airworthiness and an investigator for the crash site, which is spread over several kilometers in a residential section of the city of Kano.

3. (u) The Minister said that a Special Panel to investigate the crash was being set up. Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Muhammad Uwais will head the Special Panel. The Panel will begin meeting next week and hopes to complete its work in three or four weeks.

4. (u) In addition to investigating the cause of the EAS crash, Chikwe said that the Panel will also investigate the sourcing of aircraft by domestic carriers as well as their places of maintenance. Chikwe also asked for assistance in identifying better sources for aircraft and maintenance. She said there are safety concerns about present sources for both aircraft procurement and maintenance, which are mainly British, American and Eastern European. (Note: There are also several airlines that use former Yugoslav commercial aircraft. End Note.)

5. (u) Comment: We would like to be responsive. If nothing more, American experts can perhaps help the GON better define its terms of reference and scope of work on what appears, at first glance, to be an enormous and very complex undertaking.

6. (u) Chikwe's request, which was not unexpected, would seem to fall squarely within our "safe skies" initiative. The EAS aircraft was British manufacture, and we would be surprised if Chikwe also has not approached the British for assistance (we will endeavor to find out).

7. (u) We have long maintained that most domestic commercial airlines in Nigeria are unsafe. A thorough investigation into aircraft procurement and maintenance practices is long overdue.

JETER